

THE LUBOVITCHER MOVEMENT: I

Organized Mysticism

HERBERT WEINER

IN KOREA one day, an American soldier wandered off from his squad looking for a stream in which to wash his hands before opening his can of C-Rations. A shell struck the squad's position, killing every one of his comrades. Today the young veteran vows he owes his life, thus miraculously preserved, to a visit he had made, just before shipping out to Korea, to 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. There he had been counselled to observe, even while in combat, as much as he could of the Jewish law, including the commandment to wash the hands before eating. It was from the "Rebbe" of the Lubovitcher movement that the young man had received this counsel.

The story is one of hundreds told about the Rebbe's uncanny wisdom. True, some of the Rebbe's neighbors who glimpse the visitors going in and out of 770 Eastern Parkway at all hours of the day and night seem skeptical of the reputed miracles. People recall, with a touch of malice, how the building itself, with its huge entrance door, its red-tiled hall, and its mahogany-paneled rooms where the Rebbe confers blessings and advice, was formerly owned by a doctor about whose practice there had been some lifted eyebrows. The neighborhood as a whole is vaguely aware that the structure now houses some kind of Jewish religious group. But there cannot be many passers-by

who know what is really going on; that here, in this rather neglected three-story building, is the headquarters of a unique spiritual realm whose authority extends into many lands, and whose ruling head exercises an almost absolute control over the lives of tens of thousands of followers. Menachem Mendel Shneurson is the name of the present Lubovitcher Rebbe* and he is a direct descendant in the seventh generation of Shneur Zalman, the original founder of this Hasidic dynasty. He is also the son-in-law of the previous Rebbe. Yet he is only a constitutional monarch after all, for ruler and ruled are bound by the oral and written traditions of Orthodox Judaism.

The Rebbe and his followers, the Hasidim, do not like their movement talked about as if it were only a matter of miracle tales and miraculous exploits. The plain facts of the history of the movement, they point out, are more wonderful than all the stories about the powers of all the Lubovitcher Rebbes. Founded about two hundred years ago in Northern Russia, the movement has since been active in many other countries and is today in some ways stronger and more influential than when it first began. Though mysticism lies at its core, the Lubovitcher movement has been blessed with a flair for organization and public relations that has enabled it to strike firm roots in environments as diverse as Communist Russia, North Africa, and the United States. Today as in the past, thousands of Lubovitcher followers continue to accept the Rebbe's word as authoritative,

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*Among Hasidim, the title "Rebbe" signifies "Leader." The Rebbe is sometimes called "Tzaddik," or "Righteous." He may or may not be an ordained rabbi, although all the Lubovitcher Rebbes have also been rabbis.

not only in questions of ritual, but in matters of health, livelihood, and, if it comes to it, life itself.

NOBODY paid me any attention when I walked into the office at 770 Eastern Parkway. Several people were typing, others were chatting or using the telephone, and a stout man whose *yarmelke* somehow managed to cling to the side of his bald head was entering figures in a large ledger. All the men wore *yarmelkes* or hats, and the one girl working in the office had on a plain long-sleeved dress. The steel filing cabinet, the telephones studded with inter-office buttons, the quiet activity, all created an atmosphere of business-like efficiency—hardly what I had expected to find at the headquarters of a sect of mystics.

I decided to approach a man whose smart silk tie and trimmed blond mustache set him off from the other, more indifferently dressed people in the room. I introduced myself and announced my purpose of writing about the Lubovitcher movement. He told me that he was Dr. Nissan Mindel, in charge of the English-language publications of the organization. He offered me several pamphlets describing the history of the movement and something of its philosophy, but I explained that this was not primarily what I wanted. My main interest was in what Hasidim call the *p'nimiut*—the inner essence—of the movement, the source of its spiritual power, and the relation between the individual Hasid and his leader, the Rebbe. Dr. Mindel smiled and pointed out that such matters were not easy for an outsider to understand. There was no time for details, for Dr. Mindel was eager to start driving home to Long Island before the evening's traffic rush began. I asked him where I could find a Rabbi Weingarten; he, I had been told, would be a good man to see.

"Rabbi Weingarten, of course—the 'globetrotter' we call him," Dr. Mindel grinned. "I think he's home now between trips, and you can call him for an appointment."

As for an appointment with the Rebbe himself, Dr. Mindel told me to see Rabbi

Hodakov, the Rebbe's personal secretary, a thin, fair man who at the moment was using one of the several phones on his desk at the other side of the office. "Incidentally," Dr. Mindel informed me as he prepared to leave, "Rabbi Hodakov was a member of the Latvian government before our Rebbe's predecessor made him his secretary."

When Rabbi Hodakov had finished his phone conversation and disposed of two bearded young men who had been waiting to speak to him, I walked over to his desk. He extended a limp hand and asked if I spoke Yiddish. There was a quizzical but good-natured expression in his light blue eyes as I indicated my purpose in seeking an audience with the Rebbe. Rabbi Hodakov turned the pages of a little black book and murmured that the Rebbe's calendar was filled for the next six months but he would see what he could do for me. The Rebbe received people only three times a week, beginning at eight o'clock in the evening. I asked how long these evening sessions lasted. "Oh, sometimes till three, sometimes till five o'clock in the morning," he smiled. His smile, charming and rather bashful, showed a trace of pride when he mentioned the Rebbe. I asked if the Rebbe slept during the day after these meetings. Rabbi Hodakov raised his brows. "During the day the Rebbe is busy directing the activities of the Lubovitcher movement in every part of the world."

"When does he sleep?" The answer to this question was another slightly mysterious smile and a shrug. Then he made a note in his black book and told me that I could see the Rebbe four weeks hence at ten o'clock in the evening.

"You must get a lot of nudniks," I said to him self-consciously as I rose to leave. "How do you screen them?"

"Everybody is an *olam koton*—a microcosm," Rabbi Hodakov replied. "Anybody can see the Rebbe, but, of course, there have to be priorities, and"—the bashful smile appeared again—"sometimes people have to wait a long time."

"Incidentally," I asked, "how many fol-

lowers of the Lubovitcher movement are there in the world?"

"How many Jews are there in the world?" answered Rabbi Hodakov good-naturedly.

Later I learned that Rabbi Hodakov's reply to my question had not been altogether facetious. Lubovitcher Hasidim regard the Rebbe not only as their own leader but also as the spiritual "shepherd" of all Israel in his generation. "He is to us," one of his closest disciples explained to me, "what Moses was to Israel in his time. Not that the Rebbe is to be compared to Moses, 'like whom there has been none other since.' But the Rebbe is like a little Moses, like a 'picture whose size has been reduced.'" That is the difference, my informant went on to say, between the Lubovitcher Hasidim and other Hasidic sects. The other Rebbes are interested mainly in their own Hasidim, while the Lubovitcher Rebbe considers himself responsible for the spiritual and bodily welfare of every Jew, no matter where he lives or what he believes.

THE following week I called Rabbi Weingarten on the phone and asked for an appointment. The genial personality of "the globe-trotter," as Dr. Mindel had called him, came through even on the phone; he seemed hardly able to delay his exposition of Hasidism until we met. A chance remark I made about hearing a baby crying in his house brought forth a Hasidic *vertel*, one of those aphorisms spoken in the name of the Rebbe. "Yes, when a baby cries he has to be answered, and sometimes," Rabbi Weingarten added significantly, "a seventy-year-old man cries like a baby."

Rabbi Weingarten's home was not far from the Rebbe's office, and when I arrived I found myself confronting a surprisingly young man. Despite his long brown beard, he did not seem much more than thirty years old. My visit had been arranged for the early evening, and all his children were asleep except for a five-year-old whose head (covered by a *yarmelke*) kept popping out of the window above while his father and I conversed on the small porch below. "Gei

shlofen, yingele—Go to bed, little boy—" Rabbi Weingarten called out to him, and the little head darted in, only to reappear a few seconds later. Rabbi Weingarten's English was touched by the slightest of accents, and I asked him if he always used Yiddish with his children. He told me that Yiddish was still the basic language of communication in the Lubovitcher movement, though his children spoke English. The Rebbe delivered his discourses in Yiddish, although, Rabbi Weingarten hastened to inform me, he was fluent in a great many languages. "He studied science, you know, at the Sorbonne, before being chosen Rebbe."

I hadn't known this, and Rabbi Weingarten seemed gratified by my surprise. Here I had an opportunity to turn to the subject I was most curious about—the Rebbe's reputed powers. Rabbi Weingarten quickly began to supply me with stories about people who had been helped by the Rebbe. A girl from Brazil, for example, had been advised by her doctors to undergo a serious brain operation, but the Rebbe had disagreed. "They make their living by cutting; I make my living by not cutting," the Rebbe likes to say. His opinion had finally been upheld by a brain specialist, and the child was now well.

How could the powers of the Rebbe be explained? Rabbi Weingarten admitted it would be hard for one like myself who had not seen the evidence with his own eyes to believe, but he tried to explain it to me nevertheless. The Rebbe had unusual powers because he was a holy man—that is, every limb of his body was sanctified by pure living and by the total observance of God's commandments. This was not an idea peculiar to Hasidism—even Maimonides, the philosopher and rationalist, had asserted that the spirit of prophecy might descend upon anyone who had completely purified his heart and tongue and limbs. In addition to this, however, the Rebbe, being a direct descendant of the "Alter Rebbe," Shneur Zalman, the founder of the Lubovitcher movement, had inherited the accrued merit of his ancestry.

Lubovitch, Rabbi Weingarten told me, was a branch—in his opinion, the main branch—of the Hasidic movement that was inaugurated in the Ukraine early in the 17th century by the Baal Shem Tov—the “Master of the Good Name.” There have been many attempts to define the nature of Hasidism. Some have described it as a revolt of the Jewish masses against the over-legalistic and “dry” Judaism of the 17th and 18th centuries, others as a mystical, life-affirming reaction to circumstances which were not only crushing the Jews bodily but also filling their souls with *more shkhoire*—black despair. Against this *more shkhoire* the Baal Shem declared war, for, he said, despair was Satan’s device for destroying life. A Jew must understand that joy and goodness were at the heart of the universe; what appeared to be evil was but the external garment which the goodness of God sometimes had to assume. “We are not allowed,” the Baal Shem is reported to have declared, “to say that anything is ‘bad,’ but we may say that it is bitter, for sometimes the doctor has to use bitter as well as sweet herbs in his effort to help us.”

In addition to teaching the illusoriness of evil, Hasidism gives the individual a sense of importance. “When the commander issues a command,” said Joseph Isaac, the predecessor of the present Lubovitcher Rebbe, “then the commanded feels himself noticed and important.” Of course, every Orthodox Jew feels himself to be personally commanded by and therefore important to his God. But the Hasid has the advantage of knowing that he is needed by his *Tsadik*, his Rebbe. For though the Rebbe is as a “head” to the Hasid, the Hasidim are the Rebbe’s “feet”—and they need each other. It is from the head that the feet receive direction, but it is from the feet that strength and power flow into the head.

The movement which had been initiated by the Baal Shem Tov flourished vigorously for more than a century, and then rituals once filled with vital mystic power began to lose their inner meaning and degenerate into superstitious forms. Hasidim who had

been inspired by great and original religious spirits now began clinging to empty vessels—to “Rebbes” who were leaders by virtue of their ancestry rather than their endowments. Lubovitch, however, seemed to be an exception, and its influence had spread with the years. I asked Rabbi Weingarten how Lubovitcher Hasidism had been able to escape the degeneration of spirit which has marked several other Hasidic sects.

“*Mesiras nefesh*,” he replied quickly, “the willingness to sacrifice oneself. Our Rebbes set us an example of *mesiras nefesh*. They showed us that if something is very important, it can be done. After all, if something matters very much—as much as life itself—you find a way to do it.”

Besides, Lubovitch believed that no Jew was ever wholly lost to God. The “Alter Rebbe,” Shneur Zalman, had taught that within every Jew there was a “point” of authentic religious faith, an element of pure Jewishness, “*dos pintele Yid*.” One had to remember that “the soul itself was so much deeper than what appeared to the eye,” and that consequently the surface appearance of a Jew ought never to discourage one from attempting to tap his inner capacity for faith in and love for Judaism. It was the principle of “*dos pintele Yid*” that gave to the Lubovitcher movement its missionary spirit.

Before I left, Rabbi Weingarten told me that in two weeks’ time there would be a “*farbrengung*,” a festive gathering of Lubovitcher Hasidim, and if I wanted to see Lubovitch in action, I could do no better than be present. The *farbrengung* was the annual celebration of Rabbi Joseph Isaac’s release from the Spalerno prison in Leningrad, where he had been held by the Communists. Hasidim would be coming from all parts of the world for the occasion, and I would have a chance to hear the Rebbe “give Torah.”

I SPENT the next two weeks speaking to other Hasidim and reading about the Lubovitcher movement to prepare myself for the *farbrengung*. It soon became clear that no real understanding of the movement

was possible without a fuller acquaintance with its history. Lubovitcher Hasidim are very conscious of the history of their movement and they are forever publishing collections of anecdotes out of the lives of previous Rebbes. "Noble" families who trace their genealogy back to favorites in the courts of previous Rebbes also keep full records. Even the songs sung by other generations of Hasidim have been carefully compiled and published.

The central name in all these chronicles is Shneurson—a name derived from the founder of the movement, Shneur Zalman of Ladi, a small town in White Russia. He is the "*Alter Rebbe*"—the Old Rabbi, sometimes called simply "The Rav," "The Rabbi," or "Tanya," after a collection of his essays and letters which is studied by every Hasid almost as reverently as the Bible itself.

Shneur Zalman (1747-1812) was born in a part of White Russia that was under the spiritual influence of the "Jerusalem" of its day, Vilna in Lithuania. It was in Vilna that the traditional rabbinic exaltation of Talmudic scholarship reached its apex and found its apotheosis in Elijah the Gaon (1720-1797)—the genius of Vilna. Being a contemporary of Elijah, the natural course of events for Shneur Zalman, whose brilliance as a Talmudist was recognized when he was still a boy, would have been to go to Vilna and study in one of the schools dominated by the spirit of the great master. Shneur Zalman was well suited for the Lithuanian Talmudic world. His mind inclined toward precise definition, and tended to be legalistic in its approach to Jewish law, on which he wrote several treatises. "But two directions lay open to me," he used to say, "Vilna or Mezritch." Shneur Zalman chose Mezritch in the Ukraine, where Dov Baer, the "Great Preacher," the immediate successor of the Baal Shem, held forth. It was there, under the influence of Dov Baer that Shneur Zalman became a Hasid.

Scholars have found it difficult to define the precise doctrinal differences which divided the Hasidim from their "opponents,"

the Misnagdim. All the elements of Hasidic teaching—the emphasis on joy, on the need for inner spirit as well as outer form, and on *d'vekut*, the mystical "clinging" to God—were also part of traditional rabbinic Judaism. Perhaps the difference was a matter of degree or emphasis. At any rate, all agree that with the advent of the Baal Shem and his followers, a renewal of vitality took place in a people who had begun to feel that Judaism was an arid burden. Shneur Zalman was one of thousands who were touched by this new *hitlahavut*—this flaming enthusiasm of spirit. But he insisted that the primal Hasidic enthusiasm could be preserved only if it were transmuted into clearly understandable theory and teaching. The feelings of the heart were important, but not to be relied upon. They had to be controlled and fixed by the powers of the mind.

Shneur Zalman's teachings were a conscious attempt to mediate between Mezritch and Vilna, between Hasidic enthusiasm and rabbinic "learning." The result was a clear and carefully organized system of thought called *Habad*, after the first letters of the Hebrew words for wisdom (*Hochmah*), understanding (*Binah*), and knowledge (*Da-at*). Ironically, however, it was the mediator himself who became the victim and symbol of a conflict which tore communities and families apart, and brought Hasidim and Misnagdim to the point of forbidding "intermarriage" with each other.

A FEW sentences from one of the various bans of excommunication hurled at the Hasidim by the Vilna Gaon gives an indication of the temper of the struggle that raged for generations, assuming its ugliest form during the life of Shneur Zalman: "Woe unto the evil renegades who have brought forth a new law and religion. . . . Let no one pity them. Be vengeful for the Lord," wrote the saintly scholar of Vilna in 1796. "Let sparks fly from your feet and flames from your mouth, and let the sword avenge. . . ."

The "*Alter Rebbe*" tried to visit the Gaon

to explain that Hasidism was not a "new religion," and that the Hasidic emphasis on the Talmudic teaching, "There is no place empty of Him," was neither pantheistic nor contrary to rabbinic theology. His efforts were of no avail: "When we arrived at the Gaon's house, twice he shut the door in our face."

The Hasidic leader tried to comfort his followers, assuring them that in time the hatred and bitterness against Hasidism would pass away.*

Not all his disciples were so meek-spirited, however, and on the day of the Gaon's death groups of Hasidim danced in the streets of a Vilna suburb. At the grave of the Gaon, his followers swore vengeance and they carried out their threat. Twice Shneur Zalman was denounced to the Russian government for heresy and subversion by Jewish "opponents," and both times he was sent to prison. But after his second release, in 1801, it was apparent even to the Misnagdim that the Hasidic movement was firmly established.

The most surprising aspect of Shneur Zalman's turbulent life was the time he found in it for constructive organizational work. Some claim that this organization rather than the Tanya's ideas accounts for the dynamic history of Lubovitch. Most of the other Hasidic sects survived for a generation or two on the memory of their founder's inspiration, and then decayed. But in line with his conviction that "inspiration" could only be preserved in the vessels of the mind—wisdom, understanding, and knowledge—Shneur Zalman set up an effective school system. He believed also, with the Baal Shem, that "a hole in the body makes an even greater hole in the soul," and concerned himself with economic and social projects in behalf of destitute Jews. He took a particular interest in the welfare of Jews who lived in out-of-the-way communities, and always sent his disciples to such areas to teach and guide.

*See "The Tanya and the Gaon" in COMMENTARY, January 1956.—Ed.

THESE three fields of endeavor—educational, economic, and missionary—continued to be the main concerns of all the Lubovitcher Rebbes who succeeded the Tanya. When the sixth Rebbe, Rabbi Joseph Isaac (1880-1949), came to America, he immediately began working along similar lines.

One of the pictures of Rabbi Joseph Isaac shows a man with a full beard streaked with gold and gray, sitting at a table and holding a pencil over a blank piece of paper. The most impressive part of Joseph Isaac's face are his stern, commanding eyes, which are in sharp contrast with his white, almost effeminate hands. It is a face that radiates what the Hasidim call *malchus*, the visage of royalty and command. Joseph Isaac's life seemed in some respects prefigured by the career of his ancestor, the "Alter Rebbe." Like his great forefather, the sixth Rebbe had to face charges brought against him by his fellow Jews. The now defunct "Yev-sektsia," the Jewish section of the Russian Communist party, accused him of subverting the regime by propagating the Jewish religion in an underground network of religious schools throughout the Soviet Union.

He was arrested by the secret police and condemned to death, but again the first Rebbe's destiny seemed re-enacted in his life. Prominent foreign statesmen intervened on his behalf with the Soviet authorities and he was released from prison on his birthday, the 12th of Tammuz, 1927. He was able to leave Russia and settle first in Lithuania, then in Warsaw. He lived through the German bombardment of Warsaw, and again through high diplomatic influence escaped. In 1940 he arrived in New York, a sick and broken man. Nevertheless, in the remaining ten years of his life he was able to establish his movement firmly in the New World.

The talents of this European Rebbe who spoke little English seemed peculiarly well adapted for America. Perhaps his powerful will could have imposed itself on any environment, but there was something American in his flair for practical activities. He

organized "Torah Missions" to spread religious literature among Jewish farmers who were amazed to find bearded young men knocking at their doors and professing an interest in their souls. Lubovitcher Yeshiva buses began rolling through the streets of cities and towns all over America, carrying Jewish boys and girls to newly founded all-day Hebrew schools. A publication society was established and religious textbooks, in English as well as Hebrew, began to make their appearance. Joseph Isaac proved again that "nothing can stand before the will," and the movement born in Lithuania spread to every part of the United States, South America, Israel, and Australia. Before his death, Joseph Isaac saw a new and promising field for Jewish proselytizing in North Africa, and today the Lubovitcher network of schools is capturing the hearts of Sephardic children in the *mellahs*.

I HAD been warned to come early to the *farbrengung* if I wanted a seat, but the wooden tables and benches set up in the courtyard adjoining the building were already filled when I arrived. At one end of the courtyard was a long table covered with a white cloth and mounted on a platform. Most of the seats on the dais were still empty. But a row of chairs behind the central table was already occupied by bearded dignitaries of the movement. A microphone had been set up at the center of the table and hooked to loudspeakers at the other end of the courtyard. I saw a few inches of space on one of the rear benches and, following the example of others, climbed from table to table over the backs of the seated people to reach it—the tables and benches had been packed so closely together that there was no aisle space left. It was a humid summer evening, and there were beads of sweat on the faces of many of the Hasidim, who wore full jackets or long black coats along with large-brimmed hats. But nobody seemed to mind the heat, and the crowded courtyard was only further proof to the Hasidim of the greatness of their Rebbe.

There was a loud hum of conversation

as Hasidim who had not seen each other for many months exchanged greetings. Occasionally, a group of students, standing shoulder to shoulder on one of the benches, started a song, and most of the gathering joined in. I was told that the Rebbe would not appear for another hour, that is, not until about 9 P.M. I looked around the room for some of the people I had previously met. I could see the "globetrotter," Weingarten, standing on the edge of the dais next to Rabbi Hodakov, the Rebbe's personal secretary. Each was wearing a black silken cord, called a *gartel*, around his waist, a reminder to the Hasid of the distinction between the "higher" and "lower" parts of man.

The person next to whom I was sitting was dressed in a neat business suit and conventional gray hat. He told me he was a Conservative rabbi in Brooklyn who had been raised in the Lubovitcher movement and "would never cut his ties to them." He tried to attend every "gathering" and, despite his own strayings from strict Orthodoxy, was an admirer of the Rebbe. I asked him how he felt about the powers which the Hasidim attributed to the Rebbe. "Listen," he answered, "I know only this—nobody is more concerned with the fate of Jews—every Jew—than the Rebbe, and that is what attracts me to him." He indicated a man with a black beard sitting near us. "He was raised in Russia in the Lubovitch 'underground.' If you ask him how he was able to maintain his religion at the risk of death, he will tell you it was the inspiration of the Rebbe."

My neighbor pointed out some of the important personages in the courtyard. Directly to the right of the Rebbe's chair was a red-bearded man, Rabbi Mintlik, who was head of the Eastern Parkway Yeshiva. Seated at one end of the table on the dais was Rabbi Gur Aryeh, the brother-in-law of the Rebbe. I tried to get a look at him, for we had already spoken on the phone and arranged an interview. Joseph Isaac had had no sons, but he did have two daughters, and Gur Aryeh had married one of them. But it was the other son-in-law, Menachem Men-

del, who had been chosen as Rebbe after Joseph Isaac's death. I wondered on what grounds the choice had been made.

At about nine-thirty the yard suddenly became quiet. There was the sound of the scraping of chairs and benches as people tried to stand, and all eyes turned to the door which led from the courtyard into the main building. Into the yard with quick step walked the seventh Rebbe of the Lubovitcher movement, son-in-law of Joseph Isaac and a direct descendant on his father's side of the "Alter Rebbe."

Rabbi Menachem Mendel turned out to be a man of average height and build. The most striking feature of his well-formed face were his deep, gentle blue eyes in which there was little of the *malchus*—imperial sternness—of his predecessor. His complexion was pale, contrasting with his short black beard in which streaks of gray were beginning to appear. His frock coat, hat, and tie were all black and neatly tailored. The brim of the hat was just a bit larger than a conventional brim, but smaller than that of the Orthodox Hasid. I had heard that when Rabbi Menachem Mendel was studying in Paris, he had refused to wear the long black coat which was customary in Hasidic circles. Now he alludes jokingly to his former habit of dress as a device that gave him more hours for study—"Hasidim didn't come to me when I wore a short coat."

There must have been considerable discussion when the question of elevating Menachem Mendel to the spiritual throne of Lubovitch arose; Lubovitcher Rebbes had never approved of secular studies. And some of the "elders" of the movement must have wondered whether a "Paris gentleman" could ever be a Rebbe. Nevertheless, it was apparent to all who knew him that Menachem Mendel was suited by birth, by marriage, and by his own intellectual and spiritual gifts to be the leader of the Lubovitcher movement. For his part Menachem Mendel was genuinely reluctant to assume the leadership. He had taken courses in electrical engineering in Paris, while his wife

was studying architecture, and they had planned to earn their living in these professions. It required two years to persuade him to accept the position of Rebbe.

ALL this, however, was past. As he mounted the dais now and took his chair, Rabbi Menachem Mendel seemed very much at ease in his role. The audience rose when he entered and remained standing until he sat down. Once seated, he turned to receive a bottle of whiskey which he passed over the table to some outstretched hands below. As if by pre-arranged signal, little paper cups and bottles of whiskey appeared on all tables in the yard.

The students on the bench in front began clapping hands and swaying back and forth in rhythmic accompaniment to a song. Everyone, including the Rebbe, participated in the singing. In the middle of one particularly animated melody, the Rebbe leaned forward and began beating out the rhythm on the table with his fists, at which the singing of the Hasidim immediately mounted in volume and intensity. The Rebbe, a slight smile on his lips, began to sway from side to side and rose from his chair. An almost physical current of excitement ran through the audience and the singing reached a fever pitch. Near a fan in the back of the courtyard a man wearing a hat which came down to his ears was jumping up and down, clapping his hands, his eyes closed as if hypnotized. Behind the Rebbe, an elderly man with a long white beard was hopping from leg to leg, waving his arms about. Then the Rebbe sat down, and at once the current of excitement subsided.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel cleared his throat and reached for the microphone. The courtyard grew quiet as the Rebbe called out several names. One of those called was sitting near me. He leaped to his feet, his face flushed and his hands trembling as he raised his cup to the Rebbe and said, "L'chayim—to life!" The Rebbe, with a faint smile, vigorously nodded his head in return and moved his lips in an answering "L'chayim." After all those he had singled out by

name had offered toasts in this fashion, others in the room began to rise from their seats, and as soon as they had succeeded in catching the Rebbe's eye they too called out "To life!" Near me, a youngster was unable to hide a grimace of distaste as he downed his cup of strong liquor. These exchanges between the Rebbe and his Hasidim continued for about an hour, and then the Rebbe must have asked for a song because they began singing a slow melody with Yiddish words that sounded like "*Essen est zich, shlofen shloft zich, ober davenin davent zich nisht*" ("Eating and drinking take care of themselves, but not so prayer").

Only one person in the room seemed not to be singing, and that was the red-bearded rabbi standing at the Rebbe's right. He stood immobilized, staring fixedly at a spot on the table before the Rebbe. I asked my neighbor if he was by chance a Misnaged in Hasidic clothing. On the contrary, I was told, Rabbi Mintlik had the honor of being the Rabbi's cup-bearer; his feeling for the Rebbe was so intense that it had reached the level of *hitbatlut*—"self-extinction." I had heard the term *hitbatlut* several times in my conversations with the Hasidim on Eastern Parkway. The act of "extinguishing oneself" before the will and personality of the Rebbe was evidently considered one of the summits of Hasidic devotion.

After the singing was over, the Rebbe reached for the microphone and cleared his throat with a nervous little cough. As one, the *farbrengung* rose, and my neighbor informed me that we were about to "hear Torah."

HASIDISM is a mystical movement and, according to the mystic tradition, the words of the Bible have a "revealed" meaning, the *p'shat*, which serves to mask a deeper, mystical significance. These hidden meanings can be found by various modes of interpretation. There is *d'rush*—the allegorical reading of Biblical stories in which characters like Sarah and Abraham and the events of their lives are understood as illustrations of simple moral teachings; then there is *remez*

—literally, the "hint," which points to profound doctrines and ideas dealing not only with the moral relations of man to man, but with the mystic connection of man and God. The most difficult level of hidden meaning is *sod*—the secret. This is concerned with cosmological and theosophical speculation. It is a realm of discourse which can be understood only by a student already familiar with the technical concepts of the Cabbala.

As soon as he began speaking, it was apparent that the Rebbe's discourse was in the realm of *sod*, and it was also obvious that very few of the Hasidim present could follow his words—after fifteen minutes or so had passed, I noticed that eyes were closing all around me, and not in mystical ecstasy. "The reason the Hasidim must stand while the Rebbe 'gives Torah,'" my neighbor whispered to me, "is that they might fall asleep if they were to sit down." For about a half hour the Rebbe continued to discourse on the secrets of the "upper and lower waters" and the "smaller and larger visages." When he concluded, we all took our seats, the singing started again, and gradually vivacity and life seemed to surge back into the gathering. There was another round of toasts, following which the Rebbe once more took the microphone.

This time no heads nodded and everyone followed his discourse. It was, in essence, a repetition of his first talk, only now brought down from *sod* to *d'rush*. He spoke in simple Yiddish, expressing his ideas clearly and carefully. The theme of the *d'rush* was that Abraham had actually been a missionary. He quoted the rabbinic commentary on God's commandment to Abraham, "Get thee out of thy land and thy birthplace," wherein the Rabbis compare Abraham to a vial of incense that must be moved about if its fragrance is to be felt. Similarly, said the Rebbe, the descendants of Abraham must never be content to remain in a place where they feel completely at home; they too must "get out of their land." Isaac also was inspired with a sense of mission, for what else is the inner meaning of the story which tells how Isaac re-dug the wells of his father?

These wells are the symbol of the living waters within the soul of every Jew, which, like the wells in the Bible, can be stopped up. But the descendants of Isaac must not be discouraged. They must try again and again to lift the stones from the wells and to free the fountain of living waters.

I found myself rather disappointed in the Rebbe's discourse. It seemed to me as though the ideas had been "stripped for action" and deprived of their complexity, perhaps their profundity. But I remembered having been told that this was the secret of Lubovitch—its capacity to "make obvious the hidden." Of course, the Rebbe was also trying to achieve a practical objective in his talk. In his audience were Lubovitcher Hasidim from New Haven or Melbourne or North Africa who longed to be with their comrades and close to their Rebbe but who in a few hours would have to return to lonely places where they were trying to "create an environment." They needed a "pep talk" such as the Rebbe had given. And I soon discovered that there was another reason for the Rebbe's missionary theme. In a few weeks several dozen students from the Yeshiva were to set out in pairs to visit almost every state in the union in an attempt to "remove the stones from the Jewish wells of spirit." I had met some of these "missionaries" in the Yeshiva. Most of them were in their early twenties and they would have preferred to stay on Eastern Parkway, but they were going out into the world because it was the wish of the Rebbe.

Taking just enough money to cover their expenses, along with matzoh and canned foods for towns where strictly kosher food was not available, these young men journeyed forth every year before the High Holidays. Often they came to communities in the South or the West where they had no contacts at all. The problem in such towns was not the puzzled stares which people cast at these bearded rabbinical students. "We're used to that," one of them said, "and after a while you don't even notice people looking at you." The difficulty was that their

efforts were so rarely rewarded. In former days, when Shneur Zalman had sent emissaries to the isolated communities of the Caucasus, they had been received gratefully, and usually they succeeded in leaving behind them a re-inspired congregation or a new school. The young men today had to be satisfied with less. They tried to dispose of a few pieces of literature or to give encouragement to some elderly person who was trying to maintain a kosher diet under difficult circumstances.

Now the boys were ready to set out again, and the Rebbe asked them to stand up. After a toast had been exchanged with each one, the Rebbe called out another name. In the back of the room a man stood up, his face flushed with the honor of being called. "*Due cosos—Two cups*," the Rebbe said smiling, combining Italian with Hebrew. The Hasid had evidently come from Italy, and a murmur of pleasure passed around the room.

The Rebbe then delivered another discourse on the subject of youth, after which there was more singing, and then the cycle of discourse and song began again, continuing for several hours. It would have become very tiresome except for the fact that the Rebbe seemed to be arranging his talks so that they became shorter and lighter in tone as the hours went by. One of them, for example, was about the current craze for vacations in the country. It reminded him, said the Rebbe, of the person who had been ordered by his doctor to spend an hour every day in the fresh air of the woods. Unfortunately he lived three hours from the woods and in order to observe the doctor's prescription he ran to the woods at night after work, then ran back exhausted—but he obeyed the doctor's prescription. So it was, the Rebbe smiled, with many of us who feel we must go to the country in the summertime. The food is worse, and the train schedules are difficult. But we fulfill the commandment "to vacation in the country."

SEVERAL hours had passed, and I decided to relieve the pressure of the hard bench by taking a little walk during the next in-

terval of song. Outside in the courtyard some young people were selling literature and large photographs of the Lubovitcher Rebbes. Near the entrance, some fifteen or twenty women had been standing all the evening. Several of them held young children in their arms, and most of them wore long-sleeved dresses and kerchiefs that covered their heads in Orthodox fashion. A few were dressed quite stylishly, and used make-up. I wondered if they did not resent the custom which forbade their sitting with the men or participating in the exchange of toasts with the Rebbe. The week before, I had raised this question in the home of a Lubovitcher Hasid. But both the Hasid and his wife had assured me that there was much more married happiness within the movement than in the "outside" world.

Of course, they said, most of the marriages took place within Lubovitch itself. But once in a while, the wife added with a smile, "there is an intermarriage—somebody from Lubovitch will marry somebody from the Satmer Rebbe—but even that works out." Besides, the Rebbe was quite accessible to women when it came to interviews. I had asked them about the Rebbe's family life. There was an awkward pause, and both of them dropped their heads as they informed me that the Rebbe had no children. For some reason the Master of the Universe had withheld this blessing from the man who reputedly had the power of bestowing it on others.

THE Rebbe was just beginning to speak again when I returned from my stroll. The essential purpose of the evening, he said, was to attach ourselves in spirit to the *Tsaddik*, his father-in-law, Rabbi Joseph Isaac. Such attachment was not made more difficult by the fact that the *Tsaddik* was now dead. In a way it was easier, for there were no "limitations" now to his spirit: the body

no longer stood in the way of his essence. But how could we attach ourselves to a man's essence? The answer was by educating others in his ways. Therefore, the Rebbe urged, let everyone participate in this attachment and write his own name and the name of his mother on a piece of paper (so that the Rebbe might mention them in his prayers) and offer his contribution to the educational ideals and institutions of Rabbi Joseph Isaac, former Lubovitcher Rebbe.

As the papers and envelopes were being passed up to the dais, the Rebbe's humor broke out again: "Let's introduce a new custom in America—the custom of giving money joyously and with a song." His request was immediately granted.

At about 2 A.M. I left the *farbrengung*, which showed no signs of ending, and walked toward my car trying to sum up my feelings. It had been an interesting evening, and yet frustrating. There was no question about the genuineness of faith in that courtyard, but it was a faith that seemed completely beyond my own understanding and, I suspected, beyond the comprehension of most people in the 20th century.

There they were—men and women walking out of a subway station and into a courtyard where, in awe and trembling, they stood up to hear the words and receive the blessings of a man upon whom the "holy spirit" rested. What was it about the Lubovitcher tradition that could feed such springs of faith, and how did the man who gave these blessings, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, direct descendant of Shneur Zalman—how did he, who had studied science at the Sorbonne, feel about his role? Next week I had a personal appointment with the Rebbe at ten o'clock in the evening, and I wondered if he would resent my asking him these very questions.

[A second article will follow.]